

07/05/2003

Press freedom and illusions

Abdullah Ahmad

FREEDOM doesn't work as well in practice as it does in theory. Liberty without order is just as destructive as order without liberty. There is no such thing as absolute freedom, least of all in the media.

Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined four freedoms in 1941: freedom of speech, of religion, from want and from fear. He listed freedom of speech as the most important and it should exist everywhere and anywhere in the world.

Adlai Stevenson said: "A free society is one where it is safe to be unpopular." And to tell the truth and oppose war, I might add. You know how difficult it was for the Americans and British who opposed the Iraqi invasion.

During the war in Iraq, media freedom was suppressed via "embedded journalism" and selective briefings. And it was done in the name of national pride and security.

Even in the purportedly freest societies, media freedom is suborned to the national interest. I became a journalist in 1957 because I wanted to witness and record at first hand my country's independence and the building of a new nation from its formative politics.

I was 19 then, and my motive was simple: I wanted to do something I could be proud of and which could subsequently lead me into greater things, into greater service for my Malaysia.

My love of country, my unbridled patriotism, had a lot to do with it. Journalism has never been the road to riches, nor should it ever be the path to glory, but it was then a newlyminted springboard into politics. It still is, even though it is now more often used by aspiring politicians to display their intellectual egos rather than their writing, reporting or analytical skills.

Patriotism runs as thickly in my blood today as it did then, although I prefer to think that it has been tempered and refined by age and experience.

And so it is with the country's journalism, which is practised less for its own good than for the good of the nation as a whole.

The "good" of the nation, and how this is expressed in the mainstream, is defined by the majority and the government it elects, not by sensationalist profiteers, fifth columnists or piffling minorities out to sound bigger than they really are.

Press freedom was a non-issue then, and is hardly more of an issue now. The connection between the media and politics, and thus the wellbeing of the nation, remains as close and intricate today as it was then.

If there were no freedom of expression, the Press would not be taken as seriously as it is, either by the people or the Government.

Now, I do not wish to engage in the polemic of what constitutes freedom; every Tom, Dick, Musa, Ming, Muthu and Uncle Sam thinks he knows better. What they often fail to realise is that, as in the developed countries, the media in Malaysia is as much a business as it is an institution of democracy.

This makes Press freedom very easy to gauge - just pay a visit to your well-stocked newsstand. There you will find the condescension of The Economist as well as the farcically slipshod Asian Wall Street Journal, which is published here and still insultingly confused Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad with an Al-Qaeda mastermind.

Yet, once again, year after year, International Press Freedom Day pits

the pretentious activists against the pragmatic practitioners. And once again, the activists are fuelled up by foreign surveys and remote appraisals that have nothing nice to say about Malaysia.

There is some irony in this: the judgments of others, some of which are carried by our papers, are freely employed as mud for flinging at the Press during numerous seminars held to commemorate the day.

This year it was the lofty-sounding first Worldwide Press Freedom Index compiled by Paris-based Reporters sans Frontieres (RSF), which placed Malaysia at 110th of 139 countries subject to its blinkered scrutiny.

Of course, there were bits of tokenism in the index: the United States was placed below Costa Rica and Italy below Benin. But it was more than obvious that the league table was meant as ammunition for the NGO networks - no one else with a real interest in, or any on-the-ground knowledge of, the countries concerned would bother with it.

So my first response to it was, so what? Malaysia has a large and diverse media market. Press freedom is on open display in the range of choices available to the consumer, from newspapers and magazines to political party propaganda organs to the Internet and satellite TV. The methodology of the index took no account of this telling fact.

According to RSF, the index was "drawn up by asking journalists, researchers and legal experts to answer 50 questions about the whole range of press freedom violations, such as murders or arrests of journalists, censorship, pressure, state monopolies in various fields, punishment of Press law offences and regulation of the media".

Like any society to have struck a pluralistic balance between freedom and responsibility, in none of these areas can Malaysia be said to be found wanting.

Indeed, the index says less about actual Press freedom in the country than the nitpickers who were chosen to respond to the questions for Malaysia. RSF also omitted countries due to an "absence of information", the most glaring of which was Singapore.

No one who has ever been there would need 50 questions to decide on the shackles it has unapologetically installed on Press freedom. There is certainly no lack of information in that regard. What is more likely lacking is the journalists, researchers and legal experts foolish enough to come forward to take part in the survey.

The index is facile and shallow, and can easily be shown as such, or happily ignored, by any media industry articulate enough in its own defence.

RSF's tunnel vision is deliberately blatant: no correlation is made between Press freedom and the political, social, economic and cultural factors that surround it. Malaysia, a democracy, was placed one rung above Brunei, an absolute monarchy.

What galled me about the index, however, was not that it was full of holes but its demeaning lopsidedness against developing countries. RSF responds to the critics thus:

"If we were in the business of food aid, we would be helping those with nothing to eat more than those with not enough.

"We think this approach applies all the more to freedom of expression and information in a world where many more countries are trying to stamp it out than are largely respecting it."

Not only does that statement contain an inbuilt bias, but it is couched in the most patronising terms. Comparing Press freedom to food aid is merely arrogant; seeing it as deprived of sustenance for the starving, stupid populations of its target countries is humiliating.

The Malaysian media and its public defer to the laws enacted by a sovereign Parliament. We know who we are and what is right for us. No one

else can presume to tell us what to do. Freedom of expression is both guaranteed and governed by the Constitution and the statutes of a freely elected representative democracy.

International Press Freedom Day should be reserved for the many journalists who continue to risk their lives to bring out the truth. It should honour those who work in adversity and danger, such as the Unesco Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Award winner Amir Hass, an Israeli journalist who lives in and reports from Palestine.

Malaysian journalists reporting locally require no such heroics. They only have to work harder and smarter under the legal and ethical constraints that have been imposed upon them by the society they serve.

In Britain, the law courts prevent the media from reporting anything outside the public record. In the US, the rule is not allowed under the First Amendment, but the courts instead do by controlling the lawyers and the trial itself, and indirectly the media.

So, like everywhere else, the "freedom to tell" is governed by government legislation. Then why harp on the same restriction by others? In practice, it is all about self-restraint. However, self-restraint is a major sin if practised by Asians and coloureds. It is perfectly acceptable if exercised by the Anglo-Saxon West.